

THE REAL OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE



Slavoj Žižek

THE “FORMULAS OF SEXUATION”

Roger Ebert’s *The Little Book of Hollywood Clichés*¹ contains hundreds of stereotypes and obligatory scenes—from the famous “Fruit Cart!” rule (during any chase scene involving a foreign or an ethnic locale, a fruit cart will be overturned and an angry peddler will run into the middle of the street to shake his fist at the hero’s departing vehicle) or the more refined “Thanks, but no thanks” rule (when two people have just had a heart-to-heart conversation, as Person A starts to leave room, Person B tentatively says “Bob [or whatever A’s name is]?” and Person A pauses, turns, and says “Yes?” and then Person B says, “Thanks”) to the “Grocery Bag” rule (whenever a scared, cynical woman who does not want to fall in love again is pursued by a suitor who wants to tear down her wall of loneliness, she goes grocery shopping; her grocery bags then break, and the fruits and vegetables fall, either to symbolize the mess her life is in or so the suitor can help her pick up the pieces of her life, or both). This is what the “big Other,” the symbolic substance of our lives, is: a set of unwritten rules that effectively regulate our speech and acts, the ultimate guarantee of Truth to which we have to refer even when lying or trying to deceive our partners in communication, precisely in order to be successful in our deceit.

We should bear in mind, however, that in the last decades of his teaching, Lacan twice severely qualified the status of the big Other:

- first in the late 1950s, when he emphasized the fact that the “quilting point” (or “button tie”)—the quasi-transcendental master signifier that guarantees the consistency of the big Other—is ultimately a fake, an

empty signifier without a signified. Suffice it to recall how a community functions: the master signifier that guarantees the community's consistency is a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves—nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know it, that it has to mean “the real thing,” and so they use it all the time. This logic is at work not only in politico-ideological links (with different terms for the *cosa nostra*: our nation, revolution, and so on), but even in some Lacanian communities, where the group recognizes itself through the common use of some jargon-laden expressions whose meaning is not clear to anyone, be it “symbolic castration” or “divided subject”—everyone refers to them, and what binds the group together is ultimately their shared *ignorance*. Lacan's point, of course, is that psychoanalysis should enable the subject to *break* with this safe reliance on the enigmatic master signifier.

- and second, and even more radically, in Seminar XX, when Lacan developed the logic of the “not-all” (or “not-whole”) and of the exception constitutive of the universal. The paradox of the relationship between the series (of elements belonging to the universal) and its exception does not reside merely in the fact that “the exception grounds the [universal] rule,” that is, that every universal series involves the exclusion of an exception (all men have inalienable rights, with the exception of madmen, criminals, primitives, the uneducated, children, etc.). The properly dialectical point resides, rather, in the way a series and exceptions directly coincide: the series is always the series of “exceptions,” that is, of entities that display a certain exceptional quality that qualifies them to belong to the series (of heroes, members of our community, true citizens, and so on). Recall the standard male seducer's list of female conquests: each is “an exception,” each was seduced for a particular *je ne sais quoi*, and the series is precisely the series of these exceptional figures.²

The same matrix is at work in the shifts in the Lacanian notion of the symptom. What distinguishes the last stage of Lacan's teaching from the previous ones is best approached through the changed status of this notion. Previously a symptom was a pathological formation to be (ideally, at least) dissolved in and through analytic interpretation, an index that the subject had somehow and somewhere compromised his desire, or an index of the deficiency or malfunctioning of the symbolic Law that guarantees the subject's capacity to desire. In short, symptoms were the series of exceptions, disturbances, and malfunctionings, measured by the ideal of full integration into the symbolic Law (the Other). Later, however, with his notion of the universalized symptom, Lacan accomplished a paradoxical shift from the “masculine” logic of Law and its constitutive exception to the “feminine” logic, in which there is *no* exception to the series of symptoms—that is, in which there are *only* symptoms, and the symbolic Law (the paternal Name) is ultimately just one (the most efficient or established) in the series of symptoms.

This is, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's universe in Seminar XX: a universe of radical split (between signifier and signified, between jouissance of the drives and jouissance of the Other, between masculine and feminine), in which no a priori Law guarantees the connection or overlapping between the two sides, so that only partial and contingent knots-symptoms (quilting points, points of gravitation) can generate a limited and fragile coordination between the two domains. In this perspective, the "dissolution of a symptom," far from bringing about a nonpathological state of full desiring capacity, leads instead to a total psychotic catastrophe, to the dissolution of the subject's entire universe. There is no "big Other" guaranteeing the consistency of the symbolic space within which we dwell: there are just contingent, punctual, and fragile points of stability.³

One is tempted to claim that the very passage from Judaism to Christianity ultimately obeys the matrix of the passage from the "masculine" to the "feminine" formulas of sexualization. Let us clarify this passage apropos of the opposition between the jouissance of the drives and the jouissance of the Other, elaborated by Lacan in Seminar XX, which also is sexualized according to the same matrix. On the one hand, we have the closed, ultimately solipsistic circuit of drives that find their satisfaction in idiotic masturbatory (auto-erotic) activity, in the perverse circulating around object *a* as the object of a drive. On the other hand, there are subjects for whom access to jouissance is much more closely linked to the domain of the Other's discourse, to how they not so much talk as are talked about: erotic pleasure hinges, for example, on the seductive talk of the lover, on the satisfaction provided by speech itself, not just on the act in its stupidity. Does this contrast not explain the long-observed difference in how the two sexes relate to cybersex? Men are much more prone to use cyberspace as a masturbatory device for their lone playing, immersed in stupid, repetitive pleasure, while women are more prone to participate in chat rooms, using cyberspace for seductive exchanges of speech.

Do we not encounter a clear case of this opposition between masculine phallic-masturbatory jouissance of the drive and feminine jouissance of the Other in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*? Confined to his hospital bed, Jan tells Bess that she must make love to other men and describe her experiences to him in detail—this way, she will keep awake his will to live. Although she will be physically involved with other men, the true sex will occur in their conversation. Jan's jouissance is clearly phallic/masturbatory: he uses Bess to provide him with the fantasmatic screen that he needs in order to be able to indulge in solipsistic, masturbatory jouissance, while Bess finds jouissance at the level of the Other (symbolic order), that is, in her words. The ultimate source of satisfaction for her is not the sexual act itself (she engages in such acts in a purely mechanical way, as a necessary sacrifice) but the way she *reports* on it to the crippled Jan.

Bess' jouissance is a jouissance "of the Other" in more than one way: it is not only enjoyment in words but also (and this is ultimately just another aspect of the same thing) in the sense of utter alienation—her enjoyment is totally

alienated/externalized in Jan as her Other. That is, it resides entirely in her awareness that she is enabling the Other to enjoy. (This example is crucial insofar as it enables us to dispense with the standard misreading of Lacan, according to which *jouissance* feminine is a mystical beatitude beyond speech, exempted from the symbolic order—on the contrary, it is women who are immersed in the order of speech *without exception*.)⁴

How does this allow us to shed new light on the tension between Judaism and Christianity? The first paradox to take note of is that the vicious dialectic of Law and its transgression elaborated by Saint Paul is the invisible third term, the “vanishing mediator” between Judaism and Christianity. Its specter haunts both of them, although neither of the two religious positions effectively occupies its place: on the one hand, Jews are *not yet* there, that is, they treat the Law as the written Real, which does not engage them in the vicious, superego cycle of guilt; on the other hand, as Saint Paul makes clear, the basic point of Christianity proper is to *break out* of the vicious superego cycle of the Law and its transgression via Love. In Seminar VII, Lacan discusses the Paulinian dialectic of the Law and its transgression at length. Perhaps we should thus read this Paulinian dialectic along with its corollary, the *other* paradigmatic passage by Saint Paul, the one on love from Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [alternative translation: “may be burned”], but do not have love, I gain nothing. [. . .]

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end [. . .] For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Crucial here is the clearly paradoxical place of Love with regard to All (to the completed series of knowledge or prophecies). First, Saint Paul claims that there is love, even if we possess *all* knowledge—then, in the second paragraph, he claims that there is love only for *incomplete* beings, that is, beings possessing incomplete knowledge. When I will “know fully [. . .] as I have been fully known,” will there still be love? Although, unlike knowledge, “love never ends,” it is clearly only “now” (while I am still incomplete) that “faith, hope, and love abide.”

The only way out of this deadlock is to read the two inconsistent claims according to Lacan’s feminine formulas of sexuation: even when it is “all” (complete, with no exception), the field of knowledge remains in a way not-all, incomplete. Love is not an exception to the All of knowledge but rather a

“nothing” that renders incomplete even the complete series or field of knowledge. In other words, the point of the claim that, even if I were to possess all knowledge, without love, I would be nothing, is not simply that *with* love, I am “something.” For in love, *I also am nothing*, but as it were a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack. Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimate mystery of love is therefore that incompleteness is in a way higher than completion.

On the one hand, only an imperfect, lacking being loves: we love because we do *not* know everything. On the other hand, even if we were to know everything, love would inexplicably still be higher than complete knowledge. Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is, the place of ultimate perfection. Lacan’s extensive discussion of love in Seminar XX is thus to be read in the Paulinian sense, as opposed to the dialectic of the Law and its transgression. This latter dialectic is clearly “masculine” or phallic: it involves the tension between the All (the universal Law) and its constitutive exception. Love, on the other hand, is “feminine”: it involves the paradoxes of the non-All.

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AS A ZERO-INSTITUTION

The notion of sexual difference that underlies the formulas of sexuation in Seminar XX is strictly synonymous with Lacan’s proposition that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship.” Sexual difference is not a firm set of “static” symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions (heterosexual normativity that relegates homosexuality and other “perversions” to some secondary role) but the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question—something that *resists* every attempt at its symbolization. Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very “impossibility” that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what “sexual difference” will mean. What is barred is *not* what is excluded under the present hegemonic regime.⁵

How, then, are we to understand the “a-historical” status of sexual difference? Perhaps an analogy to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ notion of the “zero-institution” might be of some help here. I am referring to Lévi-Strauss’ exemplary analysis, in *Structural Anthropology*, of the spatial disposition of buildings among the Winnebago, one of the Great Lakes tribes. The tribe is divided into two subgroups (“moieties”), “those who are from above” and “those who are from below.” When we ask an individual to draw the ground plan of his or her village (the spatial disposition of cottages), we obtain two quite different answers, depending on which subgroup he or she belongs to. Both groups perceive the village as a circle. For one subgroup, however, there is within this circle another circle of central houses, so that we have two concentric circles, while for the other subgroup, the circle is split into two by a clear dividing line.

In other words, a member of the first subgroup (let us call it “conservative-corporatist”) perceives the ground plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second (“revolutionary-antagonistic”) subgroup perceives his or her village as two distinct heaps of houses, separated by an invisible frontier.⁶

Lévi-Strauss’ central point here is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on which group the observer belongs to: the very splitting into the two “relative” perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant. This constant is not the objective, “actual” disposition of buildings but rather a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, account for, “internalize,” or come to terms with: an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing in a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure.

Is it necessary to add that things are exactly the same with respect to sexual difference? “Masculine” and “feminine” are like the two configurations of houses in the Lévi-Straussian village. In order to dispel the illusion that our “developed” universe is not dominated by the same logic, suffice it to recall the splitting of our political space into Left and Right: a leftist and a rightist behave exactly like members of the opposite subgroups of the Lévi-Straussian village. They not only occupy different places within the political space, each of them perceives differently the very disposition of the political space—a leftist as the field that is inherently split by some fundamental antagonism, a rightist as the organic unity of a Community disturbed only by foreign intruders.

However, Lévi-Strauss makes a further crucial point here: since the two subgroups nonetheless form one and the same tribe, living in the same village, this identity has to be symbolically inscribed somehow. Now how is that possible, if none of the tribe’s symbolic articulations—none of its social institutions—are neutral, but are instead overdetermined by the fundamental and constitutive antagonistic split? It is possible through what Lévi-Strauss ingeniously calls the “zero-institution”—a kind of institutional counterpart to “mana,” the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such, in opposition to its absence. This zero-institution has no positive, determinate function—its only function is the purely negative one of signaling the presence and actuality of social institution as such in opposition to its absence, that is, in opposition to presocial chaos. It is the reference to such a zero-institution that enables all members of the tribe to experience themselves as members of the same tribe.

Is not this zero-institution ideology at its purest, that is, the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral, all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated and all members of society can recognize themselves? And is not the struggle for hegemony precisely the struggle

over how this zero-institution will be overdetermined, colored by some particular signification? To provide a concrete example: is not the modern notion of the nation a zero-institution that emerged with the dissolution of social links grounded in direct family or traditional symbolic matrixes—that is, when, with the onslaught of modernization, social institutions were less and less grounded in naturalized tradition and more and more experienced as a matter of “contract”?⁷ Of special importance here is the fact that national identity is experienced as at least minimally “natural,” as a belonging grounded in “blood and soil” and, as such, opposed to the “artificial” belonging to social institutions proper (state, profession, and so on). Premodern institutions functioned as “naturalized” symbolic entities (as institutions grounded in unquestionable traditions), and the moment institutions were conceived of as social artifacts, the need arose for a “naturalized” zero-institution that would serve as their neutral common ground.

Returning to sexual difference, I am tempted to risk the hypothesis that the same zero-institution logic should perhaps be applied not only to the unity of a society, but also to its antagonistic split. What if sexual difference is ultimately a kind of zero-institution of the social split of humankind, the naturalized, minimal zero-difference, a split that, prior to signaling any determinate social difference, signals this difference as such? The struggle for hegemony would then, once again, be the struggle for how this zero-difference is overdetermined by other particular social differences.

It is against this background that one should read an important, although usually overlooked, feature of Lacan’s schema of the signifier. Lacan replaces the standard Saussurian scheme (above the bar the word “arbre,” and beneath it the drawing of a tree) with the two words “gentlemen” and “ladies” next to each other above the bar and two identical drawings of a door below the bar. In order to emphasize the differential character of the signifier, Lacan first replaces Saussure’s single signifier schema with a pair of signifiers: the opposition gentlemen/ladies—that is, sexual difference. But the true surprise resides in the fact that, at the level of the imaginary referent, *there is no difference*: Lacan does not provide some graphic index of sexual difference, such as the simplified drawings of a man and a woman, as are usually found on the doors of most contemporary restrooms, but rather *the same* door reproduced twice. Is it possible to state in clearer terms that sexual difference does not designate any biological opposition grounded in “real” properties but a purely symbolic opposition to which nothing corresponds in the designated objects—nothing but the Real of some undefined *x* that cannot ever be captured by the image of the signified?

Returning to Lévi-Strauss’ example of the two drawings of the village, let us note that it is here that we can see in what precise sense the Real intervenes through anamorphosis. We have first the “actual,” “objective” arrangement of the houses and then the two different symbolizations that both distort the actual arrangement anamorphically. However, the “real” here is not the actual

arrangement but the traumatic core of the social antagonism that distorts the tribe members' view of the actual antagonism. The Real is thus the disavowed x on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted. (Incidentally, this three-level apparatus is strictly homologous to Freud's three-level apparatus for the interpretation of dreams: the real kernel of the dream is not the dream's latent thought, which is displaced onto or translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the explicit texture.)

The same is true of today's art scene: in it, the Real does *not* return primarily in the guise of the shocking brutal intrusion of excremental objects, mutilated corpses, shit, and so on. These objects are, for sure, out of place—but in order for them to be out of place, the (empty) place must already be there, and this place is rendered by “minimalist” art, starting with Malevitch. Therein resides the complicity between the two opposed icons of high modernism, Kazimir Malevitch's “The Black Square on the White Surface” and Marcel Duchamp's display of ready-made objects as works of art. The underlying notion of Duchamp's elevation of an everyday common object into a work of art is that being a work of art is not an inherent property of the object. It is the artist himself who, by preempting the (or, rather, *any*) object and locating it at a certain place, makes it a work of art—being a work of art is not a question of “why” but “where.” What Malevitch's minimalist disposition does is simply render—or isolate—this place as such, an empty place (or frame) with the proto-magic property of transforming any object that finds itself within its scope into a work of art. In short, there is no Duchamp without Malevitch: only after art practice isolates the frame/place as such, emptied of all of its content, can one indulge in the ready-made procedure. Before Malevitch, a urinal would have remained just a urinal, even if it was displayed in the most distinguished gallery.

The emergence of excremental objects that are out of place is thus strictly correlative to the emergence of the place without any object in it, of the empty frame as such. Consequently, the Real in contemporary art has three dimensions, which somehow repeat the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad within the Real. The Real is first there as the anamorphic stain, the anamorphic distortion of the direct image of reality—as a distorted image, a pure semblance that “subjectivizes” objective reality. Then the Real is there as the empty place, as a structure, a construction that is never actual or experienced as such but can only be retroactively constructed and has to be presupposed as such—the Real as symbolic construction. Finally, the Real is the obscene, excremental Object out of place, the Real “itself.” This last Real, if isolated, is a mere fetish whose fascinating/captivating presence masks the structural Real, in the same way that, in Nazi anti-Semitism, the Jew as an excremental Object is the Real that masks the unbearable “structural” Real of social antagonism. These three dimensions of the Real result from the three modes by which one can distance oneself from “ordinary” reality: one submits this reality to anamorphic distor-

tion; one introduces an object that has no place in it; and one subtracts or erases all content (objects) of reality, so that all that remains is the very empty place that these objects were filling.

“POST-SECULAR THOUGHT”? NO, THANKS!

In Seminar XX, Lacan massively rehabilitates the religious problematic (Woman as one of the names of God, etc.). However, against the background of the properly Lacanian notion of the Real, it is easy to see why the so-called “post-secular” turn of deconstruction, which finds its ultimate expression in a certain kind of Derridean appropriation of Levinas, is totally incompatible with Lacan, although some of its proponents try to link the Levinasian Other to the Lacanian Thing. This post-secular thought fully concedes that modernist critique undermined the foundations of onto-theology, the notion of God as the supreme Entity, and so on. Its point is that the ultimate outcome of this deconstructive gesture is to clear the slate for a new, undeconstructable form of spirituality, for the relationship to an unconditional Otherness that precedes ontology. What if the fundamental experience of the human subject is not that of self-presence, of the force of dialectical mediation—appropriation of all Otherness, but of a primordial passivity, sentiency, of responding, of being infinitely indebted to and responsible for the call of an Otherness that never acquires positive features but always remains withdrawn, the trace of its own absence? One is tempted to evoke here Marx’s famous quip about Proudhon’s *Poverty of Philosophy* (instead of actual people in their actual circumstances, Proudhon’s pseudo-Hegelian social theory gives these circumstances themselves, deprived of the people who bring them to life): instead of the religious matrix with God at its heart, post-secular deconstruction gives us this matrix itself, deprived of the positive figure of God that sustains it.

The same configuration is repeated in Derrida’s “fidelity” to the spirit of Marxism: “Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is also to say in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism.”¹⁸ The first thing to note here (and of which Derrida is undoubtedly aware) is how this “radicalization” relies on the traditional opposition between Letter and Spirit: reasserting the authentic spirit of the Marxist tradition means to leave behind its letter (Marx’s particular analyses and proposed revolutionary measures, which are irreducibly tainted by the tradition of ontology) in order to save from the ashes the authentic messianic promise of emancipatory liberation. What cannot but strike the eye is the uncanny proximity of such “radicalization” to (a certain common understanding of) Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*): in the messianic promise, the Marxian heritage is “sublated,” that is, its essential core is redeemed through the very gesture of overcoming/renouncing its particular historical shape. And—herein resides the crux of the matter, that is, of Derrida’s operation—the point is not simply that Marx’s particular formulation and proposed measures are to be

left behind and replaced by other, more adequate formulations and measures but rather that the messianic promise that constitutes the “spirit” of Marxism is betrayed by *any* particular formulation, by *any* translation into determinate economico-political measures. The underlying premise of Derrida’s “radicalization” of Marx is that the more “radical” these determinate economico-political measures are (up to the Khmer Rouge or Sendero Luminoso killing fields), the less they are effectively radical and the more they remain caught in the meta-physical ethico-political horizon. In other words, what Derrida’s “radicalization” means is in a way (more precisely, practically speaking) its exact opposite: the renunciation of any actual radical political measures.

The “radicality” of Derridean politics involves the irreducible gap between the messianic promise of the “democracy to come” and all of its positive incarnations: on account of its very radicality, the messianic promise forever remains a promise—it cannot ever be translated into a set of determinate, economico-political measures. The inadequacy between the abyss of the undecidable Thing and any particular decision is irreducible: our debt to the Other can never be reimbursed, our response to the Other’s call never fully adequate. This position should be opposed to the twin temptations of unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism, which both suspend the gap: while pragmatism simply reduces political activity to opportunistic maneuvering, to limited strategic interventions into contextualized situations, dispensing with any reference to transcendent Otherness, totalitarianism identifies the unconditional Otherness with a particular historical figure (the Party *is* historical Reason embodied directly).

In short, we see here the problematic of totalitarianism in its specific deconstructionist twist: at its most elementary—one is almost tempted to say ontological—level, “totalitarianism” is not simply a political force that aims at total control over social life, at rendering society totally transparent, but a short-circuit between messianic Otherness and a determinate political agent. The “to come [*à venir*]” is thus not simply an additional qualification of democracy but its innermost kernel, what makes democracy a democracy: the moment democracy is no longer “to come” but pretends to be actual—fully actualized—we enter totalitarianism.

To avoid a misunderstanding: this “democracy to come” is, of course, not simply a democracy that promises to arrive in the future, but all arrival is forever postponed. Derrida is well aware of the “urgency,” of the “now-ness,” of the need for justice. If anything is foreign to him, it is the complacent postponement of democracy to a later stage in evolution, as in the proverbial Stalinist distinction between the present “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the future “full” democracy, legitimizing the present terror as creating the necessary conditions for the later freedom. Such a “two stage” strategy is for him the very worst form of ontology; in contrast to such strategic economy of the proper dose of (un)freedom, “democracy to come” refers to the unforeseeable emergencies/outbursts of ethical responsibility, when I am suddenly confronted with an urgency to answer the call, to intervene in a situation that I experience

as intolerably unjust. However, it is symptomatic that Derrida nonetheless retains the irreducible opposition between such a spectral experience of the messianic call of justice and its “ontologization,” its transposition into a set of positive legal and political measures. Or, to put it in terms of the opposition between ethics and politics, what Derrida mobilizes here is the gap between ethics and politics:

On the one hand, ethics is left defined as the infinite responsibility of unconditional hospitality. Whilst, on the other hand, the political can be defined as the taking of a decision without any determinate transcendental guarantees. Thus, the hiatus in Levinas allows Derrida both to affirm the primacy of an ethics of hospitality, whilst leaving open the sphere of the political as a realm of risk and danger.⁹

The ethical is thus the (back)ground of undecidability, while the political is the domain of decision(s), of taking the full risk of crossing the hiatus and translating this impossible ethical request of messianic justice into a particular intervention that never lives up to this request, that is always unjust toward (some) others. The ethical domain proper, the unconditional spectral request that makes us absolutely responsible and cannot ever be translated into a positive measure/intervention, is thus perhaps not so much a formal a priori background/frame of political decisions but rather their inherent, indefinite *difference*, signaling that no determinate decision can fully “hit its mark.”

This fragile, temporary unity of unconditional, ethical injunction and pragmatic, political interventions can best be rendered by paraphrasing Kant’s famous formulation of the relationship between reason and experience: “If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.”¹⁰ Elegant as this solution is (ethics is here the condition of possibility *and* the condition of impossibility of the political, for it simultaneously opens up the space for political decision as an act without a guarantee in the big Other and condemns it to ultimate failure), it is to be opposed to the act in the Lacanian sense, in which the distance between the ethical and the political collapses.

Consider the case of Antigone. She can be said to exemplify the unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice. From the standpoint of the ethics of *Sittlichkeit*, of the mores that regulate the intersubjective collective of the polis, her insistence is effectively “mad,” disruptive, evil. In other words, is not Antigone—in the terms of the deconstructionist notion of the messianic promise that is forever “to come”—a proto-totalitarian figure? With regard to the tension (which provides the ultimate coordinates of ethical space) between the Other qua Thing, the abyssal Otherness that addresses us with an unconditional injunction, and the Other qua Third, the agency that mediates my encounter with others (other “normal” humans)—where this Third can be the figure of symbolic authority but also the “impersonal” set of rules that regulate my exchanges with others—does not Antigone stand for the exclusive and uncompromising attachment to the

Other qua Thing, eclipsing the Other qua Third, the agency of symbolic mediation/reconciliation? Or, to put it in slightly ironic terms, is not Antigone the anti-Habermas par excellence? No dialogue, no attempt to convince Creon of the good reasons for her acts through rational argumentation, but just the blind insistence on her right. If anything, the so-called “arguments” are on Creon’s side (the burial of Polyneices would stir up public unrest, etc.), while Antigone’s counterpoint is ultimately the tautological insistence: “Okay, you can say whatever you like, it will not change anything—I stick to my decision!”

This is no fancy hypothesis: some of those who read Lacan as a proto-Kantian effectively (mis)read Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone, claiming that he condemns her unconditional insistence, rejecting it as the tragic, suicidal example of losing the proper distance from the lethal Thing, of directly immersing oneself in the Thing.¹¹ From this perspective, the opposition between Creon and Antigone is one between unprincipled pragmatism and totalitarianism: far from being a totalitarian, Creon acts like a pragmatic state politician, mercilessly crushing any activity that would destabilize the smooth functioning of the state and civil peace. Moreover, is not the very elementary gesture of sublimation “totalitarian,” insofar as it consists in elevating an object into the Thing (in sublimation, something—an object that is part of our ordinary reality—is elevated into the unconditional object that the subject values more than life itself)? And is not this short-circuit between a determinate object and the Thing the minimal condition of “ontological totalitarianism”? Is not, as against this short-circuit, the ultimate ethical lesson of deconstruction the notion that the gap that separates the Thing from any determinate object is irreducible?

THE OTHER: IMAGINARY, SYMBOLIC, AND REAL

The question here is whether Lacan’s “ethics of the Real”—the ethics that focuses neither on some imaginary Good nor on the pure symbolic form of a universal Duty—is ultimately just another version of this deconstructive-Levinasian ethics of the traumatic encounter with a radical Otherness to which the subject is infinitely indebted. Is not the ultimate reference point of what Lacan himself calls the ethical Thing the neighbor, *der Nebenmensch*, in his or her abyssal dimension of irreducible Otherness that can never be reduced to the symmetry of the mutual recognition of the Subject and his Other, in which the Hegelian–Christian dialectic of intersubjective struggle finds its resolution, that is, in which the two poles are successfully mediated?

Although the temptation to concede this point is great, it is *here* that one should insist on how Lacan accomplishes the passage from the Law to Love, in short, from Judaism to Christianity. For Lacan, the ultimate horizon of ethics is *not* the infinite debt toward an abyssal Otherness. The act is for him strictly correlative to the suspension of the “big Other,” not only in the sense of the symbolic network that forms the “substance” of the subject’s existence but also

in the sense of the absent originator of the ethical Call, of the one who addresses us and to whom we are irreducibly indebted and/or responsible, since (to put it in Levinasian terms) our very existence is “responsive”—that is, we emerge as subjects in response to the Other’s Call. The (ethical) act proper is *neither* a response to the compassionate plea of my neighborly semblable (the stuff of sentimental humanism) *nor* a response to the unfathomable Other’s call.

Here, perhaps, we should risk reading Derrida against Derrida himself. In *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida tries to dissociate decision from its usual metaphysical predicates (autonomy, consciousness, activity, sovereignty, and so on) and think it as the “other’s decision in me”: “The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, an other decision, a rendering decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me.”¹² When Simon Critchley tries to explicate this Derridean notion of “the other’s decision in me” with regard to its political consequences, his formulation displays a radical ambiguity:

[. . .] political decision is made *ex nihilo*, and is not deduced or read off from a pre-given conception of justice or the moral law, as in Habermas, say, and yet it is not arbitrary. It is the demand provoked by the other’s decision in me that calls forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision.¹³

If we read these lines closely, we notice that we suddenly have *two* levels of decision: the gap is not only between the abyssal ethical Call of the Other and my (ultimately always inadequate, pragmatic, calculated, contingent, unfounded) decision how to translate this Call into a concrete intervention. Decision itself is split into the “other’s decision in me,” and my decision to accomplish some pragmatic political intervention as my answer to this other’s decision in me. In short, the first decision is identified with/as the injunction of the Thing in me to decide; it is a *decision to decide*, and it still remains my (the subject’s) responsibility to translate this decision to decide into a concrete actual intervention—that is, to “invent a new rule” out of a singular situation where this intervention has to obey pragmatic/strategic considerations and is never at the level of decision itself.

Does this distinction of the two levels apply to Antigone’s act? Is it not rather that her decision (to insist unconditionally that her brother have a proper funeral) is precisely an *absolute* one in which the two dimensions of decision *overlap*? This is the Lacanian act in which the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy, and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity: I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without reflection (I simply *have* to do it, it is not a matter of strategic deliberation). To put it in more “Lacanian” terms, the “other’s decision in me” does *not* refer to the old structuralist jargon-laden phrases on how “it is not I, the subject, who is speaking, it is the Other, the symbolic order itself, which speaks through me, so that I am spoken by it,” and other similar babble. It refers to something much more

radical and unheard of: what gives Antigone such unshakable, uncompromising fortitude to persist in her decision is precisely the *direct* identification of her particular/determinate decision with the Other's (Thing's) injunction/call. Therein lies Antigone's monstrosity, the Kierkegaardian "madness" of decision evoked by Derrida: Antigone does not merely relate to the Other-Thing; for a brief, passing moment of decision, she *is* the Thing directly, thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations.

The topic of the "other" must be submitted to a kind of spectral analysis that renders visible its imaginary, symbolic, and real aspects. It perhaps provides the ultimate case of the Lacanian notion of the "Borromean knot" that unites these three dimensions. First there is the imaginary other—other people "like me," my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirrorlike relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on. Then there is the symbolic "big Other"—the "substance" of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence. Finally there is the Other qua Real, the impossible Thing, the "inhuman partner," the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible. It is crucial to perceive how these three dimensions are linked. The neighbor (*Nebenmensch*) as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbor as my semblable, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, a monstrous Thing that cannot be "gentrified." Lacan indicates this dimension already in Seminar III:

And why [the Other] with a capital O? No doubt for a delusional reason, as is the case whenever one is obliged to provide signs that are supplementary to what language offers. That delusional reason is the following. "You are my wife"—after all, what do you know about it? "You are my master"—in point of fact, are you so sure? Precisely what constitutes the foundational value of this speech is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is apparent in the feint, is that the other is there as absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say that he is recognized but that he isn't known. Similarly, what constitutes the feint is that ultimately you do not know whether it's a feint or not. It's essentially this unknown in the otherness of the Other that characterizes the speech relation at the level at which speech is spoken to the other. (Seminar III, 48/37–38)

Lacan's early 1950's notion of the "founding word," of the statement that confers on you a symbolic title and thus makes you what you are (wife or master), usually is perceived as an echo of the theory of performatives (the link between Lacan and Austin was Emile Benveniste, the author of the notion of performatives). However, it is clear from the above quote that Lacan is aiming at something more: we need to resort to performativity, to symbolic engagement, precisely and only insofar as the other whom we encounter is not only the imaginary semblable but also the elusive absolute Other of the Real Thing with whom no reciprocal exchange is possible. In order to render our coexis-

tence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the “gentrification” of the homely Other-Thing into a “normal fellow human” cannot occur through our direct interaction but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit—there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared, relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order. So no axis between the two terms can subsist without the third one: if the functioning of the big Other is suspended, the friendly neighbor coincides with the monstrous Thing (Antigone); if there is no neighbor to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing that directly parasitizes upon me (like Daniel Paul Schreber’s God, who directly controls me, penetrating me with the rays of *jouissance*); if there is no Thing to underpin our everyday, symbolically regulated exchange with others, we find ourselves in a “flat,” aseptic, Habermasian universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication. Antigone–Schreber–Habermas: a truly uncanny *ménage à trois*.

HISTORICISM AND THE REAL

How, then, can we answer Judith Butler’s well-known objection that the Lacanian Real involves the opposition between the (hypostasized, proto-transcendental, prehistorical, and presocial) “symbolic order,” that is, the “big Other,” and “society” as the field of contingent socio-symbolic struggles? Her main arguments against Lacan can be reduced to the basic reproach that Lacan hypostasizes some historically contingent formation (even if it is Lack itself) into a proto-transcendental presocial formal *a priori*. However, this critical line of reasoning only works if the (Lacanian) Real is silently reduced to a prehistorical *a priori* symbolic norm: only in this case can Lacanian sexual difference be conceived of as an ideal prescriptive norm, and all concrete variations of sexual life be conceived of as constrained by this nonthematizable, normative condition. Butler is, of course, aware that Lacan’s “il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel” means that any “actual” sexual relationship is always tainted by failure. However, she interprets this failure as the failure of the contingent historical reality of sexual life to fully actualize the symbolic norm: the ideal is still there, even when the bodies in question—contingent and historically formed—do not conform to the ideal.

I am tempted to say that, in order to get at what Lacan is aiming at with his “il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel,” one should begin by emphasizing that, far from serving as an implicit symbolic norm that reality can never reach, sexual difference as real/impossible means precisely that there is no such norm: sexual difference is that “bedrock of impossibility” on account of which every “formalization” of sexual difference fails. In the sense in which Butler speaks of “competing universalities,” one can thus speak of competing symbolizations/normativizations of sexual difference: if sexual difference may be said to be

“formal,” it is certainly a strange form—a form whose main result is precisely that it undermines every universal form that aims at capturing it.

If one insists on referring to the opposition between the universal and the particular, between the transcendental and the contingent/pathological, then one could say that sexual difference is the paradox of the particular that is more universal than universality itself—a contingent difference, an indivisible remainder of the “pathological” sphere (in the Kantian sense of the term), that always somehow derails or destabilizes normative ideality itself. Far from being normative, sexual difference is thus pathological in the most radical sense of the term: a contingent stain that all symbolic fictions of symmetrical kinship positions try in vain to obliterate. Far from constraining in advance the variety of sexual arrangements, the Real of sexual difference is the traumatic cause that sets in motion their contingent proliferation.¹⁴

This notion of the Real also enables me to answer Butler’s reproach that Lacan hypostasizes the “big Other” into a kind of prehistorical transcendental a priori. For as we have already seen, when Lacan emphatically asserts that “there is no big Other,” his point is precisely that there is no a priori formal structural scheme exempted from historical contingencies—there are only contingent, fragile, inconsistent configurations. (Furthermore, far from clinging to the paternal symbolic authority, the “Name-of-the-Father” is for Lacan a fake, a semblance that conceals this structural inconsistency.) In other words, the claim that the Real is inherent to the Symbolic is strictly equivalent to the claim that “there is no big Other”: the Lacanian Real is that traumatic “bone in the throat” that contaminates every ideality of the symbolic, rendering it contingent and inconsistent.

For this reason, far from being opposed to historicity, the Real is its very “ahistorical” ground, the a priori of historicity itself. We can thus see how the entire topology changes from Butler’s description of the Real and the “big Other” as the prehistorical a priori to their actual functioning in Lacan’s edifice. In her critical portrait, Butler describes an ideal “big Other” that persists as a norm, although it is never fully actualized, the contingencies of history thwarting its full imposition, while Lacan’s edifice is instead centered on the tension between some traumatic “particular absolute,” some kernel resisting symbolization, and the “competing universalities” (to use Butler’s appropriate term) that endeavor in vain to symbolize/normalize it. The gap between the symbolic a priori Form and history/sociality is utterly foreign to Lacan. The “duality” with which Lacan operates is not the duality of the a priori form/norm, the symbolic Order, and its imperfect historical realization: for Lacan, as well as for Butler, there is *nothing* outside of contingent, partial, inconsistent symbolic practices, no “big Other” that guarantees their ultimate consistency. However, in contrast to Butler and historicism, Lacan grounds historicity in a different way: not in the simple empirical excess of “society” over symbolic schemas but in the resisting kernel *within* the symbolic process itself.

The Lacanian Real is thus not simply a technical term for the neutral limit of conceptualization. We should be as precise as possible here with regard to the relationship between trauma as real and the domain of socio-symbolic historical practices: the Real is neither presocial nor a social effect. Rather, the point is that the Social itself is *constituted* by the exclusion of some traumatic Real. What is “outside the Social” is not some positive a priori symbolic form/norm but merely its negative founding gesture itself.

In conclusion, how are we to counter the standard postmodern rejection of sexual difference as a “binary” opposition? One is tempted to draw a parallel to the postmodern rejection of the relevance of class antagonism: class antagonism should not, according to this view, be “essentialized” into the ultimate, hermeneutic point of reference to whose “expression” all other antagonisms can be reduced, for today we are witnessing the thriving of new, multiple political (class, ethnic, gay, ecological, feminist, religious) subjectivities, and the alliance between them is the outcome of the open, thoroughly contingent, hegemonic struggle. However, philosophers as different as Alain Badiou and Fredric Jameson have pointed out, regarding today’s multiculturalist celebration of the diversity of lifestyles, how this thriving of differences relies on an underlying One, that is, on the radical obliteration of Difference, of the antagonistic gap.¹⁵ The same goes for the standard postmodern critique of sexual difference as a “binary opposition” to be deconstructed: “there are not only two sexes, but a multitude of sexes and sexual identities.” In all of these cases, the moment we introduce “thriving multitude,” what we effectively assert is the exact opposite: underlying all-pervasive Sameness. In other words, the notion of a radical, antagonistic gap that affects the entire social body is obliterated. The nonantagonistic Society is here the very global “container” in which there is enough room for all of the multitudes of cultural communities, lifestyles, religions, and sexual orientations.¹⁶

NOTES

1. See Roger Ebert, *The Little Book of Hollywood Clichés* (London: Virgin Books, 1995).

2. I owe this point to a conversation with Alenka Zupancic. To give another example: therein also resides the deadlock of the “open marriage” relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir: it is clear, from reading their letters, that their “pact” was effectively asymmetrical and did not work, causing de Beauvoir many traumas. She expected that, although Sartre had a series of other lovers, she was nonetheless the Exception, the one true love connection, while to Sartre, it was not that she was just one in the series but that she was precisely *one of the exceptions*—his series was a series of women, each of whom was “something exceptional” to him.

3. The difference between these two notions of the symptom, the particular distortion and the universalized symptom (“sinthome”), accounts for the two opposed readings of the last shot of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (Scottie standing at the precipice of the

church tower, staring into the abyss in which Judy-Madeleine, his absolute love, vanished seconds ago): some interpreters see in it the indication of a happy ending (Scottie finally got rid of his agoraphobia and is able fully to confront life), while others see in it utter despair (if Scottie will survive the second loss of Judy-Madeleine, he will stay alive as one of the living dead). It all hinges upon how we read Lacan's statement that "woman is a symptom of man." If we use the term *symptom* in its traditional sense (a pathological formation that bears witness to the fact that the subject betrayed his desire), then the final shot effectively points toward a happy ending: Scottie's obsession with Judy-Madeleine was his "symptom," the sign of his ethical weakness, so his rectitude is restored when he gets rid of her. However, if we use the term *symptom* in its more radical sense, that is, if Judy-Madeleine is his sinthome, then the final shot points toward a catastrophic ending: when Scottie is deprived of his sinthome, his entire universe falls apart, losing its minimal consistency.

4. For a closer reading of *Breaking the Waves*, see Slavoj Žižek, "Death and the Maiden," in E. Wright (ed.), *The Žižek Reader*, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 206–221.

5. The gap that forever separates the Real of an antagonism from (its translation into) a symbolic opposition becomes palpable in a surplus that emerges apropos of every such translation. Say the moment we translate class antagonism into the opposition of classes qua positive, existing social groups (bourgeoisie versus working class), there is always, for structural reasons, a surplus, a third element that does not "fit" this opposition (e.g., lumpenproletariat). And, of course, it is the same with sexual difference qua real: this means that there is always, for structural reasons, a surplus of "perverse" excesses over "masculine" and "feminine" as two opposed symbolic identities. One is even tempted to say that the symbolic/structural articulation of the Real of an antagonism is always a triad; today, for example, class antagonism appears, within the edifice of social difference, as the triad of "top class" (the managerial, political, and intellectual elite), "middle class," and the nonintegrated "lower class" (immigrant workers, the homeless, etc.).

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Do Dual Organizations Exist?" in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 131–63; the drawings are found on pp. 133–34.

7. See Rastko Mocnik, "Das 'Subjekt, dem unterstellt wird zu glauben' und die Nation als eine Null-Institution," in *Denk-Prozesse nach Althusser*, ed. H. Boke (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1994), pp. 87–99.

8. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 92.

9. Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* (London: Verso Books, 1999), p. 275.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

11. See Rudolf Bernet, "Subjekt und Gesetz in der Ethik von Kant und Lacan," in *Kant und Psychoanalyse*, ed. Hans-Dieter Gondek and Peter Widmer (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1994), pp. 15–27.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 87.

13. Critchley, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

14. I rely here, of course, on Joan Copjec's pathbreaking "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," in *Read My Desire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 201–236. It is symptomatic how this essay on the philosophical foundations and consequences of the Lacanian notion of sexual difference is silently passed over in numerous feminist attacks on Lacan.

15. Alain Badiou, in his *Deleuze* (Paris: PUF, 1998), fully emphasizes how Deleuze, the philosopher of the thriving rhizomatic multitude, is at the same time the most radical monist in modern philosophy, the philosopher of Sameness, of the One that pervades all differences—not only at the level of the content of his writings but already at the level of his formal procedure. Is not Deleuze's style characterized by an obsessive compulsion to assert the same notional pattern or matrix in all the phenomena he is analyzing, from philosophical systems to literature and cinema?

16. There is already a precise *philosophical* reason the antagonism has to be a dyad, that is, why the “multiplication” of differences amounts to the reassertion of the underlying One. As Hegel emphasized, each genus has ultimately only two species, that is, the specific difference is ultimately the difference between the genus itself and its species “as such.” Say in our universe sexual difference is not simply the difference between the two species of the human genus but the difference between one term (man) that stands for the genus as such and the other term (woman) that stands for the Difference within the genus as such, for its specifying, particular moment. So in a dialectical analysis, even when we have the appearance of multiple species, we always have to look for the exceptional species that directly gives body to the genus as such: the true Difference is the “impossible” difference between this species and all others.

This page intentionally left blank.